Overuse Injuries in Kids: Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Running?

Written by: Rachel Brewer, MD

Dr. Brewer is a board certified pediatric sports medicine specialist and contributing writer for Girls on the Run of the Rockies. She practices at Rocky Mountain Youth Sports Medicine, an affiliate of Rocky Mountain Hospital for Children.

With an obesity epidemic in this country, the question of whether kids are being too active rarely comes into play. However, if your runner’s schedule is packed with sports leagues on top of a running program, or if she is over-training, she is at risk for an overuse injury. Here are some common questions and answers to this topic:

What is an overuse injury? Overuse injuries are chronic injuries that occur with repetitive stress on the musculoskeletal system over a course of time without allowing for adequate recovery. Pediatric athletes are prone to overuse injuries causes by stresses placed on growing bones.

What are common running overuse injuries in kids? The most common overuse injuries in kids are tendinitis, stress fractures, knee cap pain (patellofemoral pain), and apophysitis (inflammation where muscles attach to growth plates in bones).

How much is too much? The answer to this question differs for every child. It usually becomes clear when a child is over-training. Fatigue, pain, or disinterest in his or her sport, are common signs that a child is developing an overuse injury. Generally, they do not have adequate rest between sports activities.

How do I make sure my child does not acquire an overuse injury? Make sure your child has built in rest days in the weeks of scheduled sports activities (don't forget that PE also counts as an activity). Also listen to your child if he or she complains of pain or fatigue.

What is the treatment for an overuse injury? Rest is the first line of treatment. Each overuse injury has more specific treatment, but generally the treatment includes physical therapy, ice, anti-inflammatories (like ibuprofen), and possible bracing or orthotics.

There is ongoing debate about how much running is “too much” for the pediatric athlete. But the basic principles to avoiding injuries and burnout are simple – use common sense with training programs, build miles gradually, build in rest days, and listen to your athlete. And most importantly, running has to be fun!

www.girlsontherunrockies.org